



The Hunt for a Location

Narratives on the Foundation of Cities in South and Southeast Asia

In the period of the establishment and expansion of sultanates in South and Southeast Asia, the hunt was a central narrative event during which an observed omen was instrumental to found a new city. Such narratives were new and replaced or co-opted the older tropes of epiphanies that explained the foundations of cities and temples. This article examines several later stories about the beginnings of cities that were founded between 1200 and 1600—curiously, all of these accounts were written between 1400 and 1800.

KEYWORDS: cities—early modern period—foundation myths—
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There are few works dedicated to studying the foundation stories of cities in South Asia, particularly in the late medieval and early modern periods. Perhaps so-called mythological and folk sources were not acceptable during these historic periods, as historic sources acceptable for their verisimilitude were expected. A narrative that was too widespread as a foundation story was always suspect, and a wide circulation and acceptance ironically helped its rejection by Rankean positivist scholarship. Several historians in early twentieth-century South Asia dismissed common stories regarding the foundation of cities as trite. For example, Ghulam Yazdani (1885–1962), the director of the Archaeological Survey of the Nizam’s Dominions, remarked about the story regarding the foundation of Bidar in 1427 that “...this story is not worthy of consideration, for it had been told by Indian writers in connexion with the foundation of other ancient towns” (Yazdani 1947, 5). The Nizam’s Dominions of Hyderabad was the largest princely state in British India, and a pioneering one in the fields of archaeological and historical research in South Asia.

The expectation for foundation stories to be historic documents of the period that they describe is a fallacious one. Foundation stories are equally, if not more, telling of the period *in* which they were written, and not merely *about* which they describe. Yet, throughout the twentieth century, most historians of South Asia continued their attempts at using folklore and textual narratives as primary documentary sources, and then inevitably dismissed them of their import. For example, regarding a story about the foundation of Hyderabad, the historian H. K. Sherwani (1891–1980) wrote:

It is said that the King, who was fond of the chase, went out hunting, and when he had crossed the bridge over the Musi, he came to a level ground which pleased him well. It may be remarked here that such episodes are found in our chroniclers in a number of contexts, and they only add a romantic element to the otherwise prosaic narratives. (Sherwani 1967, 14)

In an essay on the processes and narratives of state building, Sanjay Subrahmanyam addressed the emergence of an early historic consciousness in South India. He argued that the “texts themselves were the sites of contestation, open to variant readings” (1998, 384). In this paper, that argument is furthered with an attempt to understand an ecumene in which a set of topoi and tropes circulated widely. These shared motifs eventually became the basis for

localized geographical and historical knowledge. In this article, we will look at a singular topos used for the foundational myths of cities, examining its wide geographical and narrow temporal distribution. This small group of foundation-myths from South Asia and Southeast Asia, all composed in the middle of the second millennium, are based on a common pattern. Here, we trace this particular narrative with its variants and the contexts in which it was produced and disseminated, to understand the mechanisms and function of the trope.

INDIC FOUNDATION MYTHS

Stith Thompson's *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature* (1932–36), the definitive reference work on worldwide motifs, largely misses most foundation myths.¹ In that publication, the foundation of cities in South Asia is described only twice: in myths of where the cow sits (1932–36 v.6, 142) and where the arrow falls (1932–36 v.6, 143). Yet, the observation of a hierophany has long been the common myth to explain the foundation of a temple or a city, particularly in Hindu, Buddhist, or Jain contexts. As many urban centers and cities considered a patron deity or a central temple as the *raison d'être* for their existence, it is not surprising that many of the foundation myths of pre-Islamic South Asian cities used the same tropes as the foundations of temples and cities. There are three common narratives that can be found across South Asia before the advent of a greater Islamicate culture in the second millennium.

The first and common story usually involves a rural pastoralist; he or she would graze cattle when something miraculous happened. The observers of the miracle were either the cowherd, or other villagers who saw one of the cattle indulging in peculiar behavior. In many stories, the form of that curious behavior would involve a cow squirting or spraying milk of her own volition at a particular spot (see Korom 2016). A physical fragment of divine presence (commonly an ancient statue or a self-manifested *svayambhū*) was unearthed at the location of the miracle, marking it as a *tīrtha*, a location where the divine and human worlds cross. The site often formed the nucleus of a large temple complex, which was also the center of a large urban area. Though this particular narrative is not the focus of this paper, it was a common pre-Islamic, pan-Indian foundation story used for many sites and temples. The narrative is found across large areas of South Asia. For example, a story of this type is used to explain the foundation of the Paśupatināth temple in Nepal. In this story, a cowherd called Nepa came with his cow every day to the banks of the Vagmati river, where the cow "...spilled streams of milk on a heap of reeds. When these streams were seen by the cowherd at that moistened spot...the illustrious Pasupati Bhattarak emerged" (Michaels 1990, 133). The site described in the narrative is where this very famous temple now rests. In another quintessential story of the same trope, this one from the eastern state of Odisha in India, a cowherd boy from Chaunrpur crossed the Mahānadī river in flood, having followed a black cow that went missing for a particular time every day. As narrated by the folklorist Chitrasen Pasayat:

To his amusement, he saw the cow crossing the high current of the river *Mahanadi*...He observed the cow going up to a stone and spraying her milk over it. The cowherd boy realized that there was a greater or superior power, which directed the behavior of the black cow. Thence, he observed devotion, submission and reverence to the supernatural power residing in that rock. Subsequently, people residing nearby came to know about this fact and visited the site. Seeing the location, they at once assumed it to be a *Saiva Pitha* and since then started worshipping it. It would not be out of context to mention here that the abovementioned religious myth is connected with a large number of religious *Pithas* all over the state in Odisha, which consist of not only *Saiva Pithas*, but *Vaisnava Pithas*. (Pasayat, 2009)

It is commonplace that many of the most sacred sites of Śaivism, one of the major sects of Hinduism devoted to the worship of Śiva, the god of destruction, are built around a natural stone formation that is taken to be a visible manifestation or *liṅga* of Śiva's otherwise invisible presence in the world. It appears that the common folk topos presented in this story fits very well with the ubiquitous narrative of Hindu Śaivas.

A second commonly invoked trope inserted sites into a pilgrimage network. Cities were founded as convenient stops along a pious circuit, and various stories about deities tied in the various sites as part of a single narrative. These stories relied on a fragmented whole, whether it was the personal effect of a divine figure or the dismembered parts of a demonic being. An example of the first is Śiva assuming the form of a deer and then shattering an antler in four pieces as the gods tried to seize him and take him back to Kāśī, also known as Varanasi, the deity's sacred city (Michaels 1990, 135). One of the antler horn pieces marks the focal point in the form of a *liṅga* at the Paśupatināth temple complex in Kathmandu mentioned earlier. Similarly, the settlements, temples, and sites considered holy for the great goddess (*devī*) across South Asia are all at places where the 108 dismembered parts of her body in her form as Sati fell to the ground. This is a narrative that is told multiple times in ancient India's great compendiums of lore or mythology known as the Purāṇas. In this particular story, Śiva's wife Sati committed suicide by immolation, incensed that her father would not accept Śiva as her husband. In rage, Śiva destroyed the father's fire sacrifice, then carried Sati's corpse around the world in a fit of howling madness, until Viṣṇu intervened and dismembered the body with his razor-like discus so as to end the cycle of grief brought about by Śiva's madness. As explained by McDaniel, "sites with 108 lingas tend to be sakti pithas as well, places sacred to the goddess because her body parts fell there when she died in her incarnation as Satī, and Viṣṇu (or Śani) chopped her to pieces to cure Śiva's madness at her death" (McDaniel 2012, 62). The temples that mark holy spots are often at the center of large towns and cities. Such foundation stories usually eliminate human agents.

The third common trope used for a foundation story of a city was the mediation of a holy man who would use his superior spiritual powers to determine the apt location for founding a new city, often validating a new dynasty as well. The presence of the living teacher was an important South Asian mode of acknowledging divinity

in a specific location, and the abode of the holy man became an important locus for founding a settlement. In South Asia, the holy man's abode was one of the most symbolic typologies that also shaped the architecture of the temple (Ashraf 2002). There are several variants of this foundation story, such as the foundation by the Śākya of a town on the site of a hermitage of the holy man Kapila at the location of an "unpeopled wild" (Mukherji 1901, 6). This town, Kapilāvastu, was named in honor of this sage. It subsequently became famous throughout the world as one of the sites of the Buddha's early life. Similarly, the cities of Vijayanagara (according to one variant) and Udaipur were also founded at particular locations on the basis of a holy man's advice, narratives that will be examined in some detail later.

The pragmatic reasons for siting cities and towns in foundational myths might well have been strategic, identifying defensive locations from where to launch campaigns, with the advantage of being on well-traveled mercantile routes. Yet, the narratives had to provide reasons that ensured harmony with the greater cosmos. Hierophany, or other forms of divine intervention, often tempered the role of human agency. In this context, over-determination can be understood as the mechanism of addressing varied audiences; thus, two or more foundation myths were often conflated. In the second millennium, the political, pragmatic, and social conditions for the justification of siting new settlements had completely changed. Under the emerging sultanates, newer theories of kingship and justice, along with novel technologies of water management were seen in South Asia. For example, as an index of this change, it is worth noting that all pre-sultanate cities in South Asia were also close to a river, irrespective of whether the latter was perennial or seasonal. Under the sultanates, the hunting myth was popular, and technologies of water conveyance, such as pipes, conduits, *qanāts* (horizontal underground wells that have their origins in Iranian lands), and other devices made it possible to locate cities in otherwise undesirable places.

The sources from South Asia and Southeast Asia that are used in this article are of varying provenance: the near contemporaneous chronicles that describe the foundation of a city, those that were composed much later, and narratives that were primarily oral. To complicate the texture, the translations used are mostly from the colonial period, where the accuracy, editing, and selections for the translation were mediated by the political concerns of the period (Kulkarni 2006). With that caveat, it is yet possible to track a single narrative, that of the hunter and the hunted, which provides the locus for founding a city.

THE STORY OF THE HUNTER AND THE HUNTED

Whether these shifts in technology, statecraft, or court culture caused the emergence of new topoi to explain the foundation of a city at a given location, cannot be definitively explained. But it is undeniable that new topoi were introduced. A common one was that of the hunted prey turning on the hunting beasts, a metonymic allusion to a weaker state resisting a larger established empire. There is little doubt that there was an oblique reference to the protagonists in these stories, most of whom were parvenu nobles or rebellious princes who had just declared

independence and started new polities. In the period after the twelfth century, when the South Asian world was enriched with the folklore of a new Persianate culture, a new topos emerged to explain the founding of cities. In the new narrative, a royal figure (let us call him a prince) on a hunt was taken aback by the prey turning upon and chasing the more powerful hunting animals. Either on his own, or sometimes through the mediation of a holy man, the prince took this to be a good omen, and the foundation of a city at that spot was thereupon deemed auspicious and inevitable. As noted for the foundation stories of Vijayanagara, Malacca, and Chandrapur, “all these cities were founded by local rulers asserting their independence from a powerful established order. We can only speculate on how this myth may have traveled across such a vast area. It could have been through merchants as all these cities fall along medieval subcontinental trade routes which went all the way to South East Asia and we know that Gujarati merchants had old trade links with Malacca” (Yagnik and Sheth 2011, 10–11). We do not know with certainty when these stories were first written, but they all describe cities founded between 1300 and 1700, and the evidence suggests that they were all written roughly a few hundred years past the period of foundation. The geographical area covered by these stories stretches from present-day Pakistan to Singapore. Given such defined geographical and temporal realms for this explanation as to why cities were founded at specific locations, it should be possible to contextualize the foundation myth and habilitate it in the anxieties and political realities of the period. Given the range of languages in which the story is produced, from Persian to Bahasa,² the texture of the narrative is difficult to essentialize. The narrative, in all its variants, is the key element of the myth, and provides the text. Using Alan Dundes’ triad of text, texture, and context, the first element, text, provides the data; the second, texture, is extremely varied and cannot be used meaningfully; but the third, context, can fortunately be recovered (Dundes 1978, 22–37). Not entirely unnoticed in the past as evidenced by Sherwani’s remark, recently a lecture and subsequent publication on the same topic have come to my notice (Balasubrahmanyam, 2014).

In the West Asian and North African Islamicate world, foundation stories are justified using astrology or astronomy as the rational basis for determining sites and time—as with Cairo, which was to be founded at an auspicious moment signaled by astrologers, who would ring a bell on ropes hung from pole to pole at the marked site. A crow sat on the ropes causing the bells to ring, at which the city was founded at an inauspicious moment (Lane-Poole 1902, 118). Similarly, Baghdad was founded by the Caliph al-Mansur in 762 to mark the beginning of the Abbasid dynasty, and he did so by choosing a location where two rivers came together. Even the plan was circular, laid out in the most geometric and rational fashion, and though nothing survives of the original, there is adequate literature starting from the tenth century to suggest some truth to the narrative’s claim (Micheau 2008).

THE FOUNDATION OF PASAI AND MALACCA

The different versions and variants of the foundation story under study in this paper are presented here. They have been grouped on the basis of geographical

affinity. The Sultanates of Malacca and Pasai straddle the straits of Malacca, to the north and south, on the Malay peninsula and the island of Sumatra respectively. Founded by renegade princes, these two kingdoms were among the earliest to vitalize a Malay lingua franca across the region and were important in the formulation of a Malay-Muslim culture that was part of the greater Islamicate world. The Pasai sultanate was founded by Sultan Malik al-Saleh (r. 1267–97), who converted to Islam. Iskandar Shah (r. 1400–14) founded the Malacca sultanate. He was the last ruler of Singapura (modern Singapore), and had been chased by rival kings from Singapura, which forced him to found the new sultanate and its capital as he sought refuge.

The history of the foundation of Pasai is given in the *Hikayat Raja-Raja Pasai*, a text that we only know from a single manuscript that was commissioned by Stamford Raffles in 1814 (Teeuw, 1964). It was thought that the work was authored in the fourteenth century, but now it is clear that there are fragments that might be later. The story of the founding of the capital of the Sultanate of Malacca is also recorded in the *Sejarah Melayu*, a text that has been traditionally dated to between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, but which might also have earlier fragments. Almost all Malay manuscripts are known only from nineteenth-century copies of earlier manuscripts, most of which were destroyed (Ming 1987).

Most of the texts that are chronicles of kings, kingdoms, and dynasties are written over a period of time, with selective additions, deletions, and accretions, thus making these texts, or elements within, difficult to date.³ It is common belief that the *Sejarah Melayu*, which describes the foundation of Malacca, borrowed heavily from the foundation myth of Pasai in the *Hikayat Raja-Raja Pasai*. One of these stories is how a hunting dog was outwitted by a mousedeer, thus marking the spot for the foundation of Pasai and of Malakka (Hill 1961, 27). Yet, there are a few differences in the two texts. In the *Hikayat Raja-Raja Pasai*, the king Malik al-Saleh's dog, Pasai, barks on the site that is then thought of as suitable for the capital:

The legend of the founding of Pasai. Malik-al-Saleh (d. 1297) was out hunting when his dog named Pasai barked at a mousedeer which attacked it on some high ground. Saying "What a fine place this is where even the mousedeer are full of fight," Sultan Maliku'l-Saleh built a palace and a city on the high ground. He called it Pasai. (Hill 1961, 32–33)

It is only in the *Sejarah Melayu* that the foundation of the Sultanate of Malacca is explained using the trope of the hunted animal attacking the hunting dog. The city was established when Sultan Iskandar (also known as Rājā Paramēśvara) was fleeing Singapore. There are between twenty and thirty manuscript copies of the text, with minor variations (Roolvink 1967).

The text was composed sometime around 1535 but underwent several changes and recensions by the time the manuscript called Raffles MS 18 (Blagden recension) was written in 1612 (Winstedt 1938, 27–28). In this story, the king's hunting dog is attacked by the mousedeer, and thus it was seen as a miraculous location for a new capital city:

Raja Iskandar moved to Biawak Busok and Kota Burok, placed a Mantri over Sening Ujong and came to Bertam where leaning against a mēlaka tree he saw a mouse-deer attack a dog: so he founded a settlement there and called it Melaka.
(Winstedt 1938, 4)

The foundation stories of Pasai and the capital of the Sultanate of Malacca are not completely separable because of their intertwined histories.

ANAHILAPAṬṬANA, AHMADABAD, AND UDAIPUR

The three cities in western India that share similar foundation stories are Anahilapaṭṭana, Ahmadabad, and Udaipur. Anahilapaṭṭana was the capital city of the Solaṅkī dynasty (960–1243) and served in that capacity until the end of the polity, when it was destroyed by the sultans of Delhi. Though the city is supposed to have been founded earlier, it was made the capital by the first Solaṅkī ruler. The sultans of Gujarat founded Gujarat (1407–1573) to serve as their capital, and it was eventually taken over by the Mughals when they annexed Gujarat to their domains. The sultans of Gujarat were appointed as the governors of Gujarat by the sultans of Delhi, but they soon rebelled and declared independence. Udaipur was founded when the Rāṇā of Mewār fled from a Mughal invasion of the fort of Chittor and was looking for a suitable place to found his new kingdom. He set up a new state in Udaipur and the dynasty ruled from 1559 till 1947. All three cities were founded by parvenu nobles or persecuted kings. Curiously, the foundation stories all seem to have been written within a range of a few hundred years of each other, even though they were founded over a period of more than five hundred years.

The city of Anahilapaṭṭana, which was the capital of the region of Gujarat until Ahmadabad emerged in the early fifteenth century, was founded in 747 or 817 (802 VS), as narrated in the *Mirat-i Ahmadi* (Bird 1835), a history written sometime between 1756 and 1762 (Khan 1835, 2). Here, the narrative conflates the two common topoi, of the cowherd and of a weaker animal chasing a stronger one:

The shepherd, whose name was Anhil, stipulated that the city should be named after him; saying at the same time, that he had seen a hare beat a dog by her exertion and agility. The ground was selected...received the name of Anhilwarah...when the population increased, and the town became a place of note, was changed to Patan
(Khan 1835, 140).

Another translation of the same text done under the *Gaekwad Oriental Series* reads:

[Vanraj] laid foundation of the city of Pattan and made it his capital. From that time till the foundation of great Ahmedabad, the capital of Gujerat was the city of Pattan. It is related that when he intended to lay the foundation of Pattan, he went out for recreation and hunting in search and inquiry of a suitable place. A shepherd named Anhil, getting information about his intention, pointed out to him a (piece of) land agreeable to his wish on condition that his name should be associated with it. He said, “I saw a hare on a (particular) spot who, with boldness and daring, freed himself from the mouth of a dog and ran away.” He

prospered that place and named it Anhul warah which gradually became famous as Naharwarah. (Lokhandwala 1965, 22)

Strangely, this same text mentions the foundation of the city of Ahmadabad only in passing, even naming it incorrectly as Ahmadnagar:

Sultan Ahmad followed [the Raja of Idur] into the mountainous country, where he established the city of Ahmadnagar, situated ten coss from Idur, and on the banks of the river channel called Sabarmati; and, having enclosed it with a strong stone wall, made choice of it for a residence. (Khan 1835, 190)

The other translation of the *Mirāt-i Ahmadi* also misnames the city, perhaps a suggestion of how texts were copied and used as sources for other texts. It reads as follows:

He again marched towards Idar in the year 830, eight hundred and thirty. The Raja fled to a mountainous region. The Sultan founded the City of Ahmednagar on the bank of the River Hathmati at a distance of ten Kuroh (1 Kuroh = 2 miles) from Idar on the border of Gujarat. He built a fort of strong stones and decided to reside there. (Lokhandwala 1965, 38)

This cursory treatment is also repeated in another history of Gujarat compiled on the basis of the *Mirat-i Ahmadi*:

Soon afterwards, in 1413–14, Ahmad Shah attacked and defeated Asa Bhil, chief of Asawal, and, finding the site of that town suitable for his capital, he changed its name to Ahmadabad, and busied himself in enlarging and fortifying the city. (Watson 1886, 28)

Similarly, in an older history of Gujarat written in 1556 by Sikandar ibn Muhammad, the *Mirat-i Sikandari*, the foundation of Ahmadabad is described without the story of a hare chasing hunting dogs. The city is supposed to have been founded at the hands of four Ahmads, the saint Shaikh Ahmad Khaṭṭū, along with Sultan Ahmad, Mullah Ahmad, and another Shaikh Ahmad. There are descriptions of buildings within the city, but not much more about the reason for choosing the site, other than: "...with the advice of Saint Khwajah, Ganj-Bakhsh began to build Ahmedabad" (Faridi 1889, 11).

It is clear that all these sources that were composed between the mid-sixteenth and mid-eighteenth centuries describe the foundation of Anahilapaṭṭana (also known as Paṭṭana) as determined by the epiphany of a hare chasing or escaping a hunting dog. Ahmadabad did not have this foundation myth till much later. Almost out of nowhere, the foundation of Ahmadabad is given full treatment in a book written by Edalji Dosabhai in 1894, where the location of the city is explained on the basis of two pieces of lore:

The first, and perhaps the most powerful, was the king's love for Asa Bhil's daughter. The second was his admiration of the courage displayed by a hare which, while the king was hunting on this spot, fiercely attacked his hounds. This has given rise to the popular saying: "When a hare attacked a dog, the king founded the city." (Dosabhai 1894, 69)

In the same book, Anahilapaṭṭana lacks a foundation story with a dog and a hare: “Anhilwar is said to owe its name to the fact that when Van-Raj was in search of a site for the city, Anhil, a shepherd, consented to make known a suitable spot on the express condition that the city, when built, be named after himself. The king, true to his promise, gave it the name of Anhilwar” (Dosabhai 1894, 11). Dosabhai claimed to have consulted all the usual sources like the *Mirat-i Sikandari* and the *Mirat-i Ahmadi*, along with Grant Duff’s *History of the Marathas*.

The foundation of Udaipur is curious, in that certain vestigial elements of the hunt remain, but without any reason or rationale to the overall narrative. The trope of the holy man advising on the location of a new city is also overlaid on the hunting narrative. Sometimes, the hunt is omitted altogether, with only the story of the holy man. Later histories of the foundation of Udaipur omit all such narratives, perhaps in the rational positivist mode of Yazdani and other historians of that generation. The *Handbook of Meywar and Guide to its Principal Objects of Interest* was written by Fateh Lal Mehta (b. 1868) (Mehta 1888, 8), who was the scion of a long line of prime ministers from the state of Udaipur (Lethbridge 1893, 402). The author of this work was no doubt in complete control of all stories and legends regarding the foundation of the city of Udaipur, given his lineage and his position as a revenue official, and his book was presented to the King-Emperor George V while visiting Udaipur as Prince of Wales (Rao 1915, 143). Yet, the description is brief, with no mention of a holy man or a hunt: “To this place, after the capture of Chitor by Akbar in 1568 A.D., the Maharana Udey Sing of Meywar repaired and built himself a refuge among the mountains. Some years previously he had formed the lake, still called after him *Udey Sagar*, at the entrance of the valley” (Mehta 1888, 8). An addendum to the 1888 edition of this work repeated the story in the same unembellished form: “On the loss of his capital the Rana retired to the valley of the Girwa in the *Aravali Hills*, where he founded the city of Oodeypore, henceforth the capital of Meywar” (Mehta 1888, 42, italics in original). James Tod, who was interested in the lore of the region, also reported a similar foundation for Udaipur: “When Udai Singh abandoned Chitor, he found refuge in the valley of the Girwoh in the Aravalli, close to the retreat of his great ancestor, Bappa, ere he conquered Chitor” (Payne 1910, 72; Tod 1914 v.I, 263). Tod compiled his magnum opus using all available sources, including *charaṇs* and *bhāṭs* (traditional communities of poets), hereditary groups of professional genealogists, bards, and panegyrists (Freitag 2007, 89).

Yet, other stories regarding the foundation of Udaipur abound. Most of them use the trope of the holy man:

Returning to the Aravalli hills...the Maharana recognised the sense of building in a valley with the protection of hills, forests, and lakes around... In the forest, Udai Singh encountered an ascetic, an old man who had renounced all worldly things and who was therefore beyond caste. He advised him to establish a settlement at the end of the lake and to enlarge the lake itself. Thus were laid the first stones of the city of Udaipur (which Udai named after himself) in 1559.

(Masters 2012, 60)

There are also stories where the foundation myth of the hunted hare is overlaid upon this story of the holy man, but the relevance of the hare is unclear:

Udai Singh lived in Gogunda and Kumbhalgarh for short periods. He made each his makeshift capital until he moved the seat of government to his new capital beside the picturesque Lake Pichola and speared a fast-moving rabbit. All of a sudden, he caught sight of a sage meditating. After paying his respects to the holy man, and recounting the tale of the fall of Chittor, he asked the sage where he should build his capital. "Why, right here, of course, where your destiny has brought you to ask such a question," answered the sage. (Bandopadhyay, 2007)

BIDAR, HAMPI, AHMADNAGAR, AND BANGALORE

The cities of Bidar, Hampi, Ahmadnagar, and Bangalore are all in a region of India called the Deccan. Hampi was founded as the capital of the Vijayanagara empire (1343–1565) in the mid-fourteenth century when two brothers who had served the sultan of Delhi established the kingdom. Bidar was the second capital of the Bahmani sultans (1347–1526), who shifted from their earlier capital of Gulbarga in the mid-fifteenth century under Ahmad Shah Bahmani I, who had taken over the kingdom from his brother; desirous of creating his own legacy, he founded the city of Bidar. Ahmadnagar (1490–1636) was founded by one of the Bahmani commanders, who rebelled to create his own sovereign kingdom. Bangalore was founded by Kempe Gowda (r. 1537–69), who was a quasi-autonomous feudatory ruler serving the kingdom of Vijayanagara.

The Bahmani capital of Bidar, founded in 1427 by the Sultan Ahmad Shah I (r. 1422–86), was described in the Rafi-uddin Shirazi's *Tadhkirat ul-Muluk*, which was written between 1608 and 1612 (Ernst 2002):

One day when he went out hunting in the neighbourhood of Muhammadabad a dog seized a hare by the tail. The hare turned round and fighting with the dog, overcame him. Sultan Ahmad on seeing this said: — "The climate of this country seems to be conducive to bravery, seeing that a hare beats a dog. If I should found a city here and make it my capital, the men who shall be born here and grow and thrive in the climate of this region will certainly be braver and more manly. (King 1900, 65–66)

Ghulam Yazdani repeated this foundation myth when he dismissed it as a common trope (Yazdani 1947, 5). The same narrative was denied any validity by H. K. Sherwani, who wrote:

[I]t is no doubt this which has led our chroniclers to hand down to posterity stories of a Bidar rabbit or a fox chasing a dog from some other clime, and an old man of Bidar being stronger than young men of other parts of the Deccan. (Sherwani 1953, 182)

In the case of the foundation of Bidar, the location where the weak could overcome the strong was also amplified with the use of an anthropomorphic allegory, that of the old man being stronger than the young. Of course, the story of the hunt, with the hare turning on the dog, was still the dominant theme.

Hampi, the capital of the Vijayanagara kings for over two hundred years, also has a very similar story regarding its founding circa 1336. As pointed out by Anila Verghese, apart from all its natural advantages and the mythic associations with Virupakṣa, other foundation-myths suggested that the site had divine and cosmic protection:

The most popular is the story of the “hare and the hounds.” According to this legend, Hukka (CE 1336–56) and Bukka (CE 1356–77) (the first king of the Sangama dynasty and his brother, who was probably the first ruler to establish his capital at Vijayanagara) were out hunting in the Hampi region when the hare that was being pursued by their hunting dogs suddenly turned on its adversaries and began to chase the fierce hounds. On being consulted by the two brothers, the great sage Vidyaranya, who was seated in meditation, explained the meaning of this omen: namely, that this was the auspicious spot to situate a capital for here the weak would become strong and would challenge the mighty.

(Verghese 2004, 421)

Verghese has elsewhere stated that there is “no monumental or epigraphical evidence from the site itself to back up this claim” (Verghese 2000, 41). Robert Sewell displayed a similar skepticism in his *A Forgotten Empire*, when he repeated the lore:

During his reign this chief was one day hunting amongst the mountains south of the river when a hare, instead of fleeing from his dogs, flew at them and bit them. The king, astonished at this marvel, was returning homewards lost in meditation, when he met on the river-bank the sage Madhavacharya, surnamed *Vidyaranya* or “Forest of Learning,” ...who advised the chief to found a city on the spot.

(Sewell 1900, 19)

Sewell was careful to footnote this passage in his book and caution that this tale was repeated of “...almost every kingdom, principality, or large zamindari in Southern India, the usual variant being the discovery of a hidden treasure” (Sewell 1900, 19).

Vidyāraṇya, also known as Madhavācārya, lived in the late fourteenth century and was the spiritual head of the Śringerī Maṭha, an influential center of Advaita Vedānta philosophy, one of the most prominent schools of thought in modern Hinduism (Punjani 1985, 2–8). His famous work, called *Pañcadaśī*, is a classic work of the school. Its critical editions and translations usually stress Vidyāraṇya’s connection as a spiritual advisor of the kings of nascent Vijayanagara. These narratives repeat the story of the hunt and the spiritual leader’s interpretation of it:

From the two copper-plate grants dated 1336 CE (the celebrated year in which Vijayanagara was founded) we gather that Harihara I went out hunting in the forest on the southern bank of the Tungabhadra, where he saw a hound and a hare together in spite of their natural enmity. Then he met Vidyaranya on whose advice he founded a city called Vidyanagara. These inscriptions are not original and the formation of the letters are modern. Nuniz also narrates the same story...It is evident from the inscriptions that Vidyaranya had some share direct

or indirect in building the city of Vijayanagara. The city was also known as Vidy-anagara from the very beginning. (Punjani 1985, 12)

The cautionary note, that the inscriptions upon which the story is based are not from the period or place that they mention, is completely lost in later translations and popular literature:

Once Harihara and Bukka saw a strange sight. A fox running scared of a lion, suddenly stopped and looked back fearlessly at the lion. The lion retreated. Madhava Tirtha, when told about this, decided that would be the site of their kingdom. (Tejomayananda 2001, 1–2)

The story therefore was repeated without the caveat and is still repeated in popular histories. Both Hukka and Bukka appear in the traditional foundation myth of the city, in which the two youthful chiefs are portrayed as hunting on the slopes of Matanga hill near Hampi. They see a hare turn suddenly on their hounds and consult Vidyāraṇya, their spiritual preceptor, who interprets this event as an auspicious sign indicating the favorable site for a new city (Michell and Fritz 2011, 20).

In the case of Ahmadnagar, the narrative written in the first decade of the seventeenth century by Syed Ali Tabatabai in his *Burhan-i Maasir*, admittedly repeated a story from earlier writers:

Ahmad Nizam Shah, who was very fond of hunting and of wandering in the country, was one day hunting with some of his companions and nobles in the plain on which Ahmadnagar now stands. A fox was viewed, and the king ordered the hounds to be loosed on it. The fox tried to save himself by craft, but when this failed, and he was hard pressed by the hounds, he turned on them and faced them, ready to make a fight for his life. The king was much astonished, and determined to build his new capital on the spot, deeming that the land which could instil such courage into a feeble animal like the fox, was a fit place for a king's abode. (Haig 1923, 23)

The translator of this passage, Lt. Col. Sir Wolseley Haig added a footnote where he noted that, “[a] similar story is told of the foundation of Bidar, Nirmal, and other towns. In fact there are very few towns in the Dakan, the foundation of which is recorded, of which the story is not told” (Haig 1923, 23).

The naming of the city of Ahmadnagar was also modeled along the lines of Ahmadabad in Gujarat, with the following passage:

When the question of the naming of the new city came up for consideration, the king remembered that the city of Ahmadabad in Gujarat, which was built by the late Sultan Ahmad of that country, had been so called from the king who built it, his minister, and the *Qazi* of the sacred law, who all bore the name of Ahmad. In this case also, by a fortunate coincidence, the king's name was Ahmad, the name of his minister, Masnad-i Ali, Malik Nasir-ul Mulk Gujarati, was Ahmad, and the *qazi* of the royal army also bore the name of Ahmad. For this reason the new capital was named Ahmadnagar. (Haig 1923, 23–24)

The city of Bangalore has recently acquired a foundation myth almost identical as the ones for Bidar, Hampi, and Ahmadnagar. Yet, the foundation of Bangalore

(along with the etymology of the name) is commonly ascribed to the story of the Hoyśāla king Ballāḷa II (1173–1220) eating a simple meal of beans (*baṅgāḷu*) in a village (*ūru*) when he got lost while hunting (Rao 1930 v.5, 93; Kamath 1990, 919). This story is also questionable because the name Bengaluru was first used in the ninth century in a Kannada inscription of the Western Gangas near the temple at Begur (Kamath 1990, 919).

It is commonly accepted that Kempe Gauḍā I (1510–70, also known as the Yellahanka Nada Prabhu), a feudatory lord of the Vijayanagara dynasty, founded the modern city of Bangalore (Kamath 1990, 9, 61–62). He is the same Kempe Gauḍā who is credited with building the original mud fort at Bangalore in 1537, with four watch-towers to mark the extent to which the city would grow (Sudhira, Ramachandra, and Bala Subrahmanya 2007, 379–90). But another story has been made popular in the past two decades, drawing on the foundation myths of other places in the region:

Kempe Gauda was on a hunt, when his hunting dog was chased by a hare. He chose the spot as an auspicious place to build a city, recognizing it as *gaṇḍu bhūmi* (heroic land). (Jayapal 1997, 10)

Without any historic verification, this story has now been repeated *ad nauseum* online and in popular print sources.⁴ This is a clear example of how a popular topos that is floating in a culture can be layered onto any location and story.

POWER OF THE STORY

The foundation story of a city sent a powerful message, one that performed a number of functions, including the mediation of several traditions. As explained by Naoise Mac Sweeney, postmodernist theories and literary criticism have allowed foundation myths to be read as social constructs rather than to be followed merely as documentary history. Accordingly, these “... myths are not dispassionate documentary chronicles, ...[i]nstead, they are complicated literary creations, their form and content carefully tailored in accordance with certain agendas and expectations” (MacSweeney 2013, 10).

Our knowledge of the foundation of cities has always been reliant on extant documents, or an archaeological exploration of the settlements themselves. As pointed out by Sylvie Denoix, for most of the early Islamic cities, there are no contemporary texts. Using Baghdad and Cairo as examples, she has argued that the earliest recorded histories of the foundation of the cities are written only a century or so later (Denoix 2008, 116–17). But, as is observed, “founded cities—mythical because original, and by virtue of this, exerting a special force on the imagination—have been liable to give rise to particular representations. Such cities are often said to have originated with a saint or, sometimes, with a conqueror. In all cases, the myth is there to glorify the initial period” (Denoix 2008, 117). The cities of Baghdad and Cairo later became exemplars of cities in the Islamic world, and even the foundation of cities in India referenced Baghdad and Cairo as equals, to suggest that a new city had come of age (Briggs 1829, Vol. 3, 201).

After the arrival of Islam in South Asia, the first attempt at consolidating an empire that would encompass most of the subcontinent occurred from the thirteenth to the mid-fourteenth centuries, under the Sultans of Delhi. The regional kingdoms that resulted from the fragmentation of this period were all started by parvenu nobles or rebellious princes, resembling the fragmentation of the Mughal empire in the eighteenth century. Yet, the earliest version we have of such a story is from Southeast Asia, even though the manuscripts physically date from much later. The geographical trajectory of the narrative certainly involves overseas travel, though it is difficult to tell in what direction. There is a long history of the movement of ideas between South Asia and Southeast Asia, including language, lore and custom. What does the movement of such a story convey? Between South Asia and Southeast Asia, the movement of homologous toponyms has been the subject of some enquiry. Place names evoke the aura of another place and time, prosperous and blessed. Does the transfer of a foundation myth allow the transmission of a similar kind of aura?

As remarked earlier by Haig and Sewell, this particular story was rife in the Decan and South India. But it was not uncommon in the north. Running searches through district gazetteers and other administrative compendia of geographical and historical information on different places shows that several other small principalities and states have similar stories, for example, the foundation of Gonda, a city that was the capital of a small princely state in North India in the fifteenth through the seventeenth centuries:

It is related that in 1618 the Emperor Jahangir heard through Mirza Ali Beg, the Jahagirdar of Khurasa, that Man Singh of Gohani had caught a remarkably fine elephant in the Tarai jungles, and ordered that both the Zamindar and his beast should be invited in this Darbar. The elephant was added to the Imperial stable and the Zamindar recompensed with the title of Raja. The Raja was hunting near where Gonda now is when a hare turned round and put his hounds to flight. "If the air of this place," he exclaimed, "will make hares braver than dogs, what will it do for men?" He immediately left the Gohani and laid the foundation of a new capital which he called Gonda after a cowshed which he found on the spot. (Lethbridge 1893, 548–49)

It is worth noting that this story is not found in the *Tuzuk-i Jahangiri* or any other chronicles from the Mughal Court. Perhaps it is a foundation myth composed a century or two later, as we can see three distinct tropes being used to construct the story of the foundation of Gonda: being inducted into the noble hierarchy with the capture of an elephant, the chase of the hunting dogs by the hunted animal, and the foundation of a city at the spot occupied by a bovine. All three narratives have completely different histories, but all three had to be used in conjunction to convey the particulars and local specificity required by the audience in the kingdom of Gonda. Structuralist interpretations of such composite myths will reveal that it is the relationship between the constituent units in the story that give it meaning, as Claude Levi-Strauss pointed out in his essay on the structure of the myth (Levi-Strauss 1955, 431). This is indeed the trope for a foundation myth in the greater Indian world, and it seems to be relevant for a period of four to five

hundred years, in a period that saw the emergence of various sultanates across the sub-continent and beyond.

The Mughal empire (from the mid-sixteenth to the eighteenth century) did not require recourse to such stories, perhaps because of the Mughal predilection for settling cities only in previously well-established urban sites. Most of the Mughal rebellious and renegade governors and princes wanted to appropriate the aura of the Mughal king, who had been cultivated and fashioned as a semi-divine figure since the period of Akbar. A miracle in the Mughal world therefore could only be in the domain of the court, and all divine and miraculous narratives had to involve the Mughal court itself, other than a few Sufi orders like the Chishtis.

CONCLUSION

The trope of the errant cow, the holy man, and the aberrant hunt all form the basis of founding a city and are particular to South and Southeast Asia. These tropes get used in conjunction or combination, as a means of over-determining the location of a city. The displaced anxieties of rebellious princes and court nobles founding new cities (and new kingdoms) in unlikely locations are all resolved using these stories. The story of the hunt, then, mixing a number of these tropes, redeems the act of rebellion by equating it with the foundation of city, an action that is divinely sanctioned through a miraculous event. In a larger Islamicate context, the reconciliation of divinely sanctioned cities and Muslim theological conservatism resulted in nature as the agent for divine intervention.

NOTES

1. In the section dedicated to “City, origin of” (A995) Thompson has very little on the topic, and certainly not the story discussed here.
2. C. C. Brown (1952) mentions the foundation of the Sultanate of Malacca with such a story; the earliest extant manuscript of the text dates only from 1612 (Raffles Malay MS no. 18 in the Royal Asiatic Society of England and Ireland) but the introductory text mentions an earlier manuscript, the *Hekayat Melayu* (most likely from the fifteenth century), on which it was based.
3. A. H. Hill (1961, 26) writes, “Variations in the style of writing as well as the subject matter considered in the light of history show that, like the *Sejarah Melayu*, it was not the work of a single author. Such documents were rare and valuable things, kept carefully in the court archives to preserve them from decay. From time to time a fresh copy would be made by a pandit, who alone, in an age of illiteracy, would be allowed access to the manuscript. He was at liberty to make what corrections he liked in the text, and to add new material to bring it up to date, in the light of his personal experience and literary background, and the religious and political prejudices of his time.”
4. Popular publications have been championing this story within the past couple of decades. See, for example, D. M. Silveira (1995). There are also at least two dozen websites that perpetuate this myth as the foundation story of Bangalore. On occasion, multiple narratives are provided to explain the location of the city.

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